

# A HOUSE PARTY IN RUSSIA

Incidents in the Intimate Home Life  
on a Nobleman's Family Estate  
By MRS. KENNETH BROWN

WHEN we came to the end of the railroad line we found a *char-à-banc* waiting to take us the rest of the way to the palace of Prince Alexis, which was within two hundred miles of the Siberian frontier. This *char-à-banc* was a large, commodious stage-coach, fitted up with well-mattressed seats on which one could sleep comfortably at night. It was drawn by eight horses, and traveled day and night, stopping every twelve hours for us to get out and walk around a bit. An alcohol lamp gave us hot tea, and the *char-à-banc* was supplied with plenty of cold food. One night we slept in a village; but except for this we traveled continuously for five days and nights, after three days changing our conveyance for a big covered sleigh that was sent to meet us; for the ground was already covered with snow, although it was only September.

During the whole journey we met few peasants, and they either did not take the trouble to look at us at all, or else merely approached us for the purpose of selling trinkets or eatables, or stared stupidly at us, almost without curiosity.

Five days and a few hours after we had left the railroad station we reached our destination. All the land we passed through belonged to our host. He was considered one of the greatest and one of the most land-poor land-owners in that part of Russia. To show how wild and uncultivated his land is, I may mention now that on my return journey, when I traveled on horseback, a rider generally was kept considerably in advance of our party, and another behind it, to watch out for bears, so common and at times so dangerous were they.

It was already darkening, although not yet late when we reached the house. We were met by a porter in livery and two French maids, who conducted us to our apartments. There the maids helped us to undress, and took us to the Russian baths, without which a first-class Russian country-house would not be considered complete.

When I came back to my room, my trunk was already unpacked, and my dresses were neatly hanging in the closets. I was put to bed like a child and given a cup of the strongest tea I ever drank, which, moreover, was half brandy. I was sleeping when the bells of the sleighs of the returning hunting party awakened me. Jumping up, I ran to the window and had my first glimpse of a returning bear-hunt in Russia. Some of the men, all dressed in leather, were on horseback, but all the rest of the forty guests, both men and women, were hidden under furs in the sleighs.

An hour later the maid came to tell me that tea was ready. As soon as I was dressed, I went downstairs and found all the party gathered in the large hall, which was about forty-five feet long by twenty wide. It was floored with tiles, and these were nearly covered with the skins of various animals. On each side was an open fire, and near each of these were a large samovar and a table spread with caviar sandwiches and sweets (to eat caviar in Russia is never to forget it, or to be satisfied with what is found elsewhere).

My mother, who knew all the people there, was kissed on both cheeks by the women, and complimented by the men, who kissed her hand. My sister, the wife of our host, introduced me to them: "Madam," she said in the formal way that is customary with us, "is a missionary in America."

I was received with charming courtesy by the other guests, but with some surprise. "I did not know," said one of the women, "that anybody went as a missionary to America. I

thought that all the missionaries came from there."

I protested that my sister was teasing me, and that I knew nothing to teach even to Russians. They laughed, and the ice was broken at once.

Since I neither could speak nor understand Russian, the conversation was held in French; and all the nine days I was there I never heard them speak Russian. We talked a great deal about America; but no one ever asked me a direct question, that not being considered good form; but with exceeding cleverness I was induced to talk of America and to tell what I knew of it. All of them knew something of the literature and politics of America, and some of them knew a great deal.

Before we had finished our first tea, a loud gong sounded, and I was told that it was for the children to get ready for dinner; and a little later it sounded again for the beginning of the meal.

"Would you like to see the children at their dinner?" my sister asked me, knowing that I was fond of children. We went into a large dining-room, into which the children were just coming. The little boys were dressed in dark clothes, mostly of velvet, with white waistcoats; and the little girls wore light-colored gowns with low neck and short sleeves. Each boy brought in a girl on his arm, and, arrived at their places, politely pulled back her chair for her to be seated. At a table apart were the extremely young ones attended by their nurses. Apparently many of the guests had brought their children to this house party; for there were seventeen of them.

The eldest of those at the large table was a little fellow of about eleven years of age, dark and handsome. He had brought in a tiny girl with flaxen hair and gray-green eyes. She appeared more like a Slav than any of the other girls, but was dressed like an English child.

"Who is that little girl?" I asked.

"That is Katchousha Nobaloff. She came only to-day, with her governess, although her mother has been here for sometime. Is she not very beautiful? Her mother, Princess Nobaloff, is a harmless Nihilist."

The children were all talking in French, English and Russian. I went and stood near the interesting Katchousha. The two boys on either side of her were trying to talk to her; but she only shook her head at them in a way that made her yellow mane fly in all directions.

"You must make Katchousha feel at home, Kolia," said my sister to the biggest boy, who had brought Katchousha in to dinner.

"Princess, I have told her everything that I can think of," Kolia answered, "and promised to give

her my little flag, but she only shakes her head at me."

Alexievna came to Katchousha, pushed back her hair and kissed her forehead. "Little love," she said, "don't you like Kolia?"

The child shook her head.

"Why?" my sister asked.

The child shook her head again.

Then a merry little boy at the other end of the table spoke up: "Princess, you may speak with her all you like, and she will only shake her head; for she can speak neither Russian nor French. I was to take her in to dinner and speak to her in English, but Kolia took a fancy to her, and I never told him about the language, so as to have some fun with him."

"Why, Pavel!" said my sister. "I did not know that you were such a practical joker. But you ought to have thought of poor Katchousha; she is not having a very good time between Kolia and Steben, because neither one speaks English. Come quickly and change places!"

As Pavel came to take the place of Kolia, he said something in Russian that sent my sister laughing out of the room.

"What did he say?" I asked when I joined her.

"He said: 'Neither your size, nor your looks count so much as the British lingo.'"

When the children had finished their dinner, my sister played the piano, in one of the rooms opening out of the big hall, and the children danced like a lot of little fairies, while their elders looked on.

When they went to bed, I went with little Katchousha; for she had taken my fancy tremendously.

"How is it, baby, that you cannot speak either French or Russian?" I asked.

The child's eyes filled with tears of anger. "Mama never had me taught," she said. "And I liked Kolia so much! He is so big and handsome! Don't you think he will make a fine officer?"

Before I left this place, nine days later, Katchousha would already understand Kolia, and he had become her shadow.

I have heard Americans say and believe that there is no freedom of conversation in Russia. During my short stay there, however, they discussed freely their religion, their literature and their Government; and the impression they made on me was that of being the least prejudiced people I ever had met.

One evening after dinner, while men and women were smoking, one of the guests, a big land-owner too, asked our host:

"Alexis, have you introduced the new harrow?"

The face of Alexis clouded: "I have not finished courting all my peasants for their permission," he answered. "So far I have become the godfather of only three new children. When I shall have seen and coaxed them all, and have become sponsor for some more babies, I may be able to introduce it without their wrecking it. Have you succeeded in introducing it, Ignatius?" he asked, turning to another of his guests.

"Yes, I introduced it to my peasants," Ignatius responded ruefully; "but they not only smashed every harrow, but let me know that if another of the infernal machines was brought on the place they would burn the barns."

He carefully blew rings of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling, while the others all laughed; but there was a helpless ring to their laughter.

"I hear that you had had luck with your school-house, Alexievna," a woman said to my sister.

She shrugged her shoulders. My sister was not a woman to indulge in philanthropic projects to kill time. Moreover, in spite of the vast estates, money



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